

# EXPERIMENTS

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CHAPMAN  
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LONDON: MCMXXV

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY  
NORTHUMBERLAND PRESS LIMITED, NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE

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# **ARABIA DESERTA**



## *Arabia Deserta*

NOT long ago there was sent me a recently-published French book about Morocco—*Marrakech*, by the brothers Tharaud, then already in its twenty-fifth edition. What did I think of it? And why could we not write such things in English?

Well, I thought it good, despite that unseasonable military atmosphere—decidedly good of its kind; the story grows livelier and impressive towards the end. Moreover, thank Heaven, it exhales but faintly the familiar odour of Parisian patchouli; there are some luminous and suggestive metaphors and a moment of real tragedy. For the rest: head-work, self-conscious glitter, a virtuosity bordering on the precious. One detects only the frailest link of human sympathy between the authors and the scenes they describe. A wealth of outlandish customs and figures has been noted down by the pen of a scrupulous journalist and then distilled into elaborately-tinted phrases. It is almost wearisome, all this material, where so much is seen, so little felt. I recall, for instance, that suffocating chapter

<sup>1</sup> *Arabia Deserta*. By Charles M. Doughty. With an introduction by T. E. Lawrence. New Edition.

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“La Place Folle.” “Qu'il est donc malaisé,” say the authors in one place, “de peindre avec justesse le charme de l'Orient! A inventorier ces beautés . . . on a l'air d'un pédagogue.” Exactly! An artist should never “inventorier.” Why therefore this endless cataloguing in *Marrakech?* Why? Because the authors, as Frenchmen, were unable to do what they should have done—unable to make their readers really feel the life they depict. Your Gaul is a centripetal fellow, a bad nomad. His affinities with foreign folk are only skin-deep—æsthetic rather than constitutional. One suspects that, while gadding abroad, he is pretty frequently homesick. One knows it. He will tell you so himself.

As to writing such things in English, the feat is not impossible. We must try, first and foremost, to be more logical, to rid ourselves of that lamentable haziness, of those iridescent flashes of thought and feeling that can be struck out of a single word; we must learn, in short, to content ourselves with a vocabulary such as our neighbours possess. Cut down to a quarter of its size that preposterous dictionary of ours, throw on the scrap-heap all those mellow verbal forms, and consign the residue into the hands of a conscience-stricken Academy that shall stereotype the meaning and prescribe the proper usage of every item—the thing is done. There will be no more half-tones, no more interplay of shades. We shall step from